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GRAND OPENING OF NEW EXHIBIT A PICNIC FOR MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Keeping the home fires burning was no picnic at the turn of the last century, but it will be when the Montana Historical Society opens its new exhibit "Domestic Economy: Managing the Home 1890-1920" Thursday, May 9, at 6:30 p.m.

"This exhibit explores the 'new' science of Home Economics and some of the most popular features of this topic like food, clothing and home health care, which were important parts of how a home was expected to be efficiently managed," MHS Curator of History Sarah Nucci said.

Probably the most interesting part to our guests about these topics is the food, and those who attend will be treated to an indoor 1900s picnic featuring sandwiches and desserts made with recipes from that era.

"The staff pitched in with this over the last several weeks by creating and tasting recopies from our historic cookbook collection like Devil's Food Cake and Mock Mince Meat Pie," Nucci said.

A free pamphlet with historic recipies will be available throughout the exhibit's run.

The kitchen portion of a homestead era dwelling will be part of the exhibit and will include the kind of things people needed to survive on the Montana frontier.

Early homesteaders often lived miles from the closest doctor or medical professional, which meant it could be many hours or even days before help could arrive. The exhibit will include an example of a small medical kit most homesteaders kept handy.

“These early homesteaders and their neighbors were often the only medical help that was available,” MHS Reference Historian Zoe Ann Stoltz who helped create the exhibit, said. “Childbirth was often only attended by older, experienced, female neighbors.”

As home economic science developed, books and other manuals helped homesteaders make their lives better and easier. “Frequently the household manual would incorporate ways to deal with common medical problems and instruction on applying medical plaster and such,” Stoltz said.

A variety of manuals were intended to be an encyclopedia of home management. Laundry instruction, cookbooks, medical care, and even veterinary instructions all found their way into the handy books.

One of the highlights of the exhibit – especially for the curators – is a 1905 maternity dress provided for the exhibit by Rachel Fischer originally from Wibaux. “We were very excited because maternity dresses from that era are rare and we didn’t have one in our collections,” Nucci said. “Once a woman was done having children she would usually make something else out of the material used for the maternity dress.”

The everyday clothing worn by homesteaders generally was simpler than the dress clothes they wore for formal photographs and events that generally survive to today. “The science of Home Economics emphasized not only fit and fashion, but also ensured that clothing selections were meant to last,” Nucci said.

The new exhibit will provide a unique look at the everyday life of those who settled Montana, and the ways that the developing educational role of home economics helped them survive and even thrive in difficult times.

The exhibit will be up until spring of 2014.